

# DELIA

BY GERTRUDE ROSCOE

THE persistent clangor of the bell at Blanton's Mill ceased as Delia Butler turned the last corner of the street. She was still some distance away, and the sidewalk was too icy to permit any faster progress. If only the gatekeeper would look! The gates were closed promptly when the bell stopped, and those who happened to be a minute late must go back to the office entrance and wait half an hour for the door to be unlocked, then report to the clerk, answer fifty or more questions, most of them obtrusively personal, and submit to be mulcted of a quarter of a day's pay. All this flashed through Delia's mind as the last strokes sounded, and, uttering an impatient cry, she sprang into the middle of the street and ran towards the gate. The tender had seen her, and he closed the gate promptly, according to rules, but the locking of it bothered him sadly, as he had but one arm, and so Delia passed through, out of breath, but grateful to Dabney for sparing her the useless delay and nagging at the office. Nearly every loom in the weaving-shed was in motion when she pushed open the heavily weighted iron door, and the lights were so brilliant that she shaded her eyes an instant with her mittened hand. Passing her own looms, she kept on along the alley towards the head of the room, where the overseer's assistant stood at his usual post of observation while the work was being started for the day.

Miles Dent had been a fixer in the room for a long time, and had fairly won his promotion to the second hand's place by keeping his section in better working order and getting a larger amount of cloth from the looms in his care for six months at a stretch than any other fixer at Blanton's. His chief was sick, and he was temporarily in full charge of the weaving. Opportunities like this are of great use to ambitious young men in such positions. They are the examina-

tions that win them their degrees as masters of their trade, or prove their ignorance and inefficiency. It can be safely asserted that any head of a department in Blanton's who is popular with the help under him stands no chance of promotion, and is booked for dismissal whenever a more satisfactory officer can be secured to take his place. Already Miles Dent had acquired a reputation that was the choicest asset in his business capital.

When Delia approached him, hooded and shawled, the second hand knew perfectly what her errand was, for on the two previous mornings she had asked leave to go home, giving as her excuse that her baby was sick, and at the last interview she had provoked him by persisting in her request and becoming tearfully importunate after his gruff refusal. He hated snivelling women right heartily, and it suited him to ignore her existence. Waiting till she had come within a yard of him, he turned away and pretended not to hear her call him by her weaver's signal, though it would penetrate through the roar of the speed and arrest attention across a dozen rods of clashing machinery. Down the wide central walk he hurried, and did not once pause nor look around till he reached the farther end of the shed. The floor was nearly six hundred feet long, and Delia was weakened by two nights of watching and anxiety, besides the exhaustion of her regular work in the mill. She could only follow at a distance. As before, he waited till she could almost speak to him, and then set off again, this time making for the cloth-room door in the upper corner of the shed, not twenty feet from where he had at first stood. Again Delia traversed the weary length of the room between the rows of looms, whose rapidly shifting harnesses, glancing shuttles, and racing belts made her head swim as she walked. Her first passage attracted no attention from the

weavers, but the return of the two instantly made the situation plain to them.

It would never do to neglect an opportunity to please the second hand; moreover, the spectacle of the dejected woman following the man so persistently about, weeping as she went—for from sheer weakness Delia could no longer restrain her tears—was too much for the gravity of some of the young people, and they laughed and hooted, pelting her with ridicule in an abandon of ferocious fun, such as savage children might feel in baiting a prisoner compelled to pass between their ranks.

The roar of the speed was no protection to Delia. She was as expert in the lip-reading of speech as a deaf-mute, could see with her shoulders and the back of her head, and was sensitive to the fringe of her shawl. She cowered and shrank, lacing her fingers in her rosary till its silver links almost snapped, as she emerged from the forest of the Jacquard looms into a broad expanse of low machinery and quickened her pace almost to a run.

"Mother of God, pray for me—pray for me." Her lips shaped the words over and over. Then, as the weavers sprang together in twos and threes, clung to one another, and thrust groups of grinning faces towards her on either side, shouting insults and unreportable slang in her very ears as she passed, or stood singly between their looms saluting her with howls and high-pitched staccato laughter, she unconsciously dropped prescribed forms, appealing in her need directly to the Merciful.

"They mocked you. They mocked you. Jesus, help me! Help me!"

As she hurried along the panic subsided or spent itself. Another scene arose so vividly before her as to blot out all sense of the mad riot and crashing din about her—her husband holding the wailing baby and walking to and fro in the disordered kitchen at home, pausing at every turn to peer through the steamy windows for a sight of her coming back. The mocking ridicule, so terrible a moment before, was shed away like something that had never been, and her one thought was to overtake the second hand striding away into the dimness at the far end of the room, and

wring from him permission to leave her work for the day.

She almost reached him at the door of the cloth-room, but Dent again eluded her, and continued to amuse himself for nearly half an hour longer by leading her artfully along and allowing her to get quite close to him from time to time. When he had walked a mile or more and began himself to feel the fatigue of the exercise, he stopped abruptly and faced about, as though that instant aware that he was wanted.

"What are you doin' up here?" he demanded, savagely. "Who's runnin' your looms? 'F you've brought Jim in here to take your place, as you wanted to do yesterday, you can tell him to skip out, or I'll kick him into the middle of next week. I got enough of him on them old Masons. 'F he couldn't run a set of plain sheetings, how's he goin' to run them fancy looms o' yourn? You hear me? Go back to your work an' tell him to git." There was hard swearing wedged between every sentence, and the second hand further enforced his angry outburst with stamps and fist-shaking.

Delia leaned against a post, recovering her breath. She made no attempt to speak till Miles had shouted himself hoarse and stopped for her reply.

"Jim is at home with the baby," she said, quietly, "an' I must go right back. I've been up with it all night. It's dyin'." There were no tears now. Her eyes were burning with fevered intensity.

"Oh!" said Miles, suddenly becoming blandly sarcastic. "You've just come in to tell me that you are goin' home. Well, I'm on my way to the office to report all the looms runnin' in this mill. There ain't no spare hands, an' that rather interferes with your little game." Returning to his furious shouting, he continued: "Go back to your work, an' if I hear anything more of this damned nonsense about a sick kid I'll send you packin'. How many does it take to look after one squallin' brat? Jim's got nothin' else to do, an' ain't likely to have."

"But, Miles, I can't work with my baby dyin'. I know it's dyin'. You must let me go. I can't work—I can't. My poor little baby won't trouble anybody long."

"Stuff and nonsense! That's the regulation lie. You married women are always workin' it. There's a kid always ready to die whenever one of you wants to stay out a day."

Delia sank on a packing-box and sobbed aloud. Her weeping infuriated Dent. He could barely restrain his clinched and quivering fist. Fairly clubbing her with frightful curses till he was out of breath, he turned on his heel and flung himself out into the yard, slamming the door with all his might.

Delia knew that it would be worse than useless to follow him farther, and she sat half dazed where he had left her, torn between her frantic desire to fly home to her baby and the sure knowledge that it would cost her the loss of her work and all chance of future employment. At last she arose wearily and went slowly back to her looms.

At first she worked blindly in a dull, persistent way, her practised hands attending to the details of the intricate pattern-weaving automatically. Then tears came to the relief of her tortured mother-heart, and she wept long and bitterly. As the day advanced, she worked feverishly, cleaning her looms in every part, though that task was not required of her till the end of the week, cutting the waste yarn from an accumulation of bobbins that had been left for a time when she might be compelled to wait for loom-repairing, and giving herself not a moment's rest for hours.

At noon a neighbor's child came to her just as the speed started. He shouted shrilly that Jim said she must come home anyway, the baby was worse, and fled precipitately to avoid being locked in with the closing of the gates.

The word came too late, even if Delia had decided to throw prudence to the winds and go. No one could leave the mill after the bell stopped ringing, except through the office, where written leave from the head of a department was demanded. She was as much a prisoner as any captured thief in a penitentiary. Miles Dent could set her free with a line of writing or a walk across the yard to answer for her at the office, but unless he chose to relent she must stay till half past six o'clock—the regular time for quitting work.

She could see the second hand a little way off, talking to Sidonie Martel, a vivacious French woman, who showed pretty white teeth and flashed sparkling glances as he spoke, as if in answer to compliments.

"If Sidonie wanted to go out, Miles would send all over town to hunt a spare hand for her," thought Delia, bitterly, and her heart swelled fiercely with the rage of helplessness. But was she so helpless? Miles used to have that manner toward herself. He was friendly and jolly, and put himself out to oblige her, too, but he got mad with her one day, and had been as hard as iron ever since. What had angered him? Wasn't it because she would not understand him, and got mad and said sharp things to him when he was professing to take great interest in her work and praising her extravagantly one day? Why couldn't she have laughed and tossed back a silly word or two in reply, as Sidonie would have done? Wise Sidonie, who always got favors as soon as she asked for them, or had favors offered without asking. A door seemed to open in the wall of her prison a hand's-breadth as these thoughts flashed through Delia's mind. Miles would not pass that way again till two o'clock, when he would have to check the cloth in the rack just beyond her work before it could be taken to the finishing-room to be inspected.

Delia stopped her looms and bathed her face carefully. Then she propped a little square of looking-glass in the window-ledge and brushed out her long hair, arranging it in a lustrous coil at the back of her head, with soft wavy masses above the forehead and little clinging tendrils about her temples and ears. The effect was magical. She had neglected to curl her hair for months, ever since her husband lost his job and she obtained grudging leave to go to work herself, well knowing that her skill as a pattern-weaver alone obtained the concession. Turning her head this way and that, Delia studied her reflection in the glass in a curiously impersonal way. Her hair was beautiful and her eyes unusually bright, but her face was too deathly pale, and there was heavy dark circles under her eyes. She powdered over the blue shadows with starch, and

moistening a wisp of red waste yarn, carefully tinted her white cheeks. The ghastly look disappeared, and she felt sure that even a close scrutiny in the semi-shadow of the tall looms would fail to reveal the make-up.

Dent was checking the cloth busily, and happening to glance in the direction of Delia's looms, he paused with a big roll in his hands and stared hard at her. She was walking briskly about her work, looking ten years younger and quite cheerful and contented. Just then she began to sing, the musical high notes of her song penetrating easily across to where he stood. He pitched the cut of cloth on the truck and went on with his work till the account was complete.

"You women beat the devil," he said, appearing at Delia's side as she bent over a loom to draw a few broken threads into place. "Only this morning you was in a regular tantrum, chasin' me round an' yellin' fit to kill, lookin' like a mop, too. Own up, now, that you tried to put up a job on me."

"I did want to go home, Miles, but you made me cry swearin' so hard. You don't know how awful you do swear, nor how it hurts—me."

Delia leaned forward to reach a thread from the skein of piecing-yarn as she spoke, and the curve of her bosom pressed against his arm, and her lips almost touched his ear as she said the last word. Lightly swaying back with the thread in her fingers, she joined it on and drew it in place with a perfect appearance of unconsciousness. The color deepened in the man's face and he dropped the lids over his eyes. His countenance cleared, and the forbidding expression was swept away like the passing of a cloud.

"'N' you made up that yarn an' went into that tantrum to get me to let you out? I didn't think you could pretend like that, Dele. 'Tain't like you a bit."

"The baby is sick, an' I was up with it last night an' the night before, as I said; but I heard from it this noon"—the smile did not waver—"an' I guess Jim can get along till night. 'Tain't no use to kick when you put your foot down." Then, with sudden animation: "Why don't Andrews fire out that old blunderhead an' give you the name of

runnin' the weavin', an' the pay for it? You're doin' the work now, right along, whether he's sick or well."

Miles fairly glowed with gratified pride, and Delia watched him with a beating heart.

"It's comin', Dele, sooner 'n some folks imagine, but I ain't supposed to know anything about it. This is strictly between friends. But, I say, you must be fit to drop, losin' your sleep two nights runnin'. You don't want to get sick. When I'm overseer I shall want my pattern-weavers, all of them." He went about looking at the amount of cloth on each loom, and Delia scarcely breathed.

"You're away ahead of time," coming back to her side, stopping the looms with a touch of the hand, right and left, "an' you'd better go home for the rest of the day an' make up your sleep. Get your things an' I'll pass you out now."

Delia lost no time in tying on her hood, and Miles led the way towards a little corner tower, which shortened the distance considerably. At the foot of the stairs between the outer and inner door he took the shawl from her arm and wrapped it around her with a little hug, bending to touch her lips with his own.

Delia made no effort to avoid the caress, and her voice was quite natural as they crossed the yard and passed unquestioned through the office corridor to the street. She walked quietly to the first corner, then dropped the smiling mask and fled like a wild creature towards her home. People turned in amazement to look after her, and school-boys raised derisive shouts of "Stop thief," and "Fire," but she heeded nothing and ran on. Leaving the frequented streets at the first opportunity, she plunged into a labyrinth of alleys and courts, shaping her course homeward almost in a direct line. On and on she ran through vacant lots and across door-yards, under lines of drying clothes, till at last she saw the familiar line of little roofs among which was her home just ahead of her. She approached the place from the rear, running breathlessly along a slanting bank behind a board fence, where the ground was cumbered with the dead stalks of burdock and rag-weed, and littered with all the rubbish cast out from the houses in front.

"Only a few rods more, only a few steps; I must not give up now." She said it with dry lips over and over as she stumbled through the rubbish and slipped on the yielding ashes and sand. But a sudden spasm of intolerable pain gripped her side, driving the breath from her in stifled shrieks, and she could go no farther. Holding by the fence, she battled with the pain, struggled forward a few more steps, grew blind, and fell.

It was well that Dent had wrapped the heavy shawl so carefully around her. The afternoon sun shone full on the bank behind the long fence, while the chirping sparrows flitted about the still form that was only another bundle cast out on their feeding-ground.

Dusk was gathering when Delia awoke to consciousness and struggled stiffly to her feet. It seemed to her but a moment since she fell. The baby was her first thought, but she remembered the terrible pain that had seized her. "It's gone," she said, holding her hand to her side, "but I mustn't run any more."

She walked feebly around the corner, where the pickets gave her a firmer support, and reached her tenement at last. The stillness frightened her. Pausing an instant to gather strength, she let go her hold on the fence, stumbled into the house, and ran across the kitchen floor to the baby's crib.

The crib was empty; and through the open door of the sitting-room she saw the baby form straight and still on a board, covered with a white cloth, and beside it her husband sat, bowed and stricken, waiting for her to come home. Her harsh, unnatural cry aroused him, and he sprang forward and caught her in his arms as she fell. But even in falling she repulsed him, and grovelled on the floor, beating her head and clutching at her throat with frantic hands.

"Don't touch me, Jim! Don't come near me! I'm a wicked woman, too vile for you to tread on. God has taken my baby to punish me for being so bad. No, no! don't touch me. I laughed and sang and flirted with Miles when my baby was dyin'. I let him kiss me, Jim. I'm as bad as bad can be. O my God! No, no! I mustn't pray. He won't hear me. He did right to take my baby away from such a wicked mother."

Shrieking her confession with heart-breaking sobs, but never a tear, Delia clung to the bars of the empty crib, while her husband strove by every means to quiet her and assure her of his love. His confidence in her was absolute, and her wild self-accusings passed for sheer maniac raving. Only a great pity and fear for her that drowned even his grief for his dead first-born found place in his heart.

At last the paroxysm subsided, so that he could give her a soothing draught, and she lay in a half-stupor on the lounge, only at intervals starting up and raving of her shame in even of utter self-loathing. Knowing that the effect of the baby's medicine that she had taken would soon pass, the anxious husband hurried out for the doctor.

Delia listened till his footsteps died away, and then arose and went to the side of the bier. Folding back the sheet, she raised the little form tenderly, and began to carry it back and forth through the length of the two rooms, crooning a cradle-song as she walked.

"Good-night," said Miles Dent to a companion, stopping at the end of a lane of shabby little houses on the way from the mill. "I've got an errand down here."

"Goin' to look up a drunk? Lord help him!" The man laughed appreciatively, as foreseeing a diverting interview.

"Nary drunk. I'm goin' for Jim Butler. He used to work for me, but I fired him out for bein' slow. He is slower 'n an ox, on fine work, but we're puttin' in awnin' stripe. You can't break out them warps if you jump on 'em. Jim 'll do, prime, when he don't have smashes to piece up."

"Night! Hope you'll find him."

The friends separated, and Dent walked rapidly down the lane to the Butler tenement. He pushed the door open and entered without knocking, but stopped on the threshold with a shock such as he had never before experienced.

Delia advanced to meet him from the inner room with the dead baby in her arms. The reflector of a bracket lamp threw a bright light directly on her face, over which the lined and shrunken skin

seemed alive with crawling quivers. Her wide-open eyes were curiously striped, and the round, red-painted spots showed distinct on the ashy pallor of her cheeks. The dead child's head, large and heavy, with open mouth and stony eyes, rolled and lopped on its slender twisted neck as Delia dandled it lovingly high against her bosom. She came quite close to him, pressing one cheek to that of the little corpse and looking up at him with ghastly coquetry through the fringe of her curling hair, possessed with the fixed idea that she must try to please him.

The man knew the whole truth in a flash, and for an instant he could neither speak nor move.

"Didn't I fix my hair lovely, Miles?" the demented creature babbled affectedly. "It's prettier than Sidonie's, isn't it? Look at Miles, baby. Good Miles, he let mamma come home to baby."

Palm outward, Dent lifted his hand to push away the vision before him. Then hiding his face in the curve of his arm, he backed into the entry, wrenched open the outer door, and staggered blindly out into the night.